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SUBJECT: DEFAMATION CHARGE LANDS NEWSPAPER DIRECTOR IN JAIL

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¶1. (U) The 2005 defamation case of Ouargla-based El Waha newspaper took a sudden turn on March 2 when El Waha director Hadj Daoud Hadjar was arrested and sentenced to six months in prison. From his cell in Chaabet Ennichene prison in Ghardaia, Hadjar will now wait for the local court to make his six-month sentence official. The original suit against Hadjar was filed in November 2005 by a female employee of the Ghardaia town hall, whom Hadjar had accused of corruption. Hadjar then appealed the case all the way to the Supreme Court, which rejected his appeal on July 3, 2008, sending it back to the local level for sentencing.

¶2. (SBU) Defamation charges are nothing new for Hadjar. Although El Waha ceased publication in December 2006 as a print journal, it still exists online, and Hadjar has also come under fire for other provocative publications. He has faced prosecution in more than ten out of 25 court cases in which he was charged with defamation for revealing corruption and other power-abuse scandals. In 2005, he published a two-volume book entitled "Prison, Murder... From the Noble Profession to Extinction," in which he railed against the conditions in Algeria's prisons and criminal justice system.

¶3. (SBU) Journalist Chahinaz, of French-language daily l'Expression, complained to us on March 3 that the El Waha case is the latest example of an environment in which journalists are no longer allowed to disseminate information freely. She referred to recent cases against French-language daily El Watan director Omar Belhouchet and journalists Chawki Amari and Salima Tlemcani. Kamel Amarni, Secretary General of the National Syndicate of Journalists, told us on February 24 that journalists in Algeria today face "constant harassment" and are forced to devote a disproportionate amount of time and energy to preventing or responding to defamation charges (reftel).

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: What makes the sudden turn of events in Hadjar's case unusual is the speed at which his arrest and sentencing took place yesterday, despite the fact that the case dates back to 2005. Generally, the Algerian bureaucracy is not able to process both an arrest and provisional sentencing on the same day. Throughout the 25 defamation cases that have been brought against him, Hadjar has built a reputation as a muckracker unafraid to speak out on corruption, which is arguably the most sensitive issue for central and local Algerian government officials.
PEARCE